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Low sexual desire in women

As an endocrinologist I am often asked by my female patients “I just don’t feel like having sex – is there something wrong with my hormones? Is there anything you can give me to help?” In most cases, after chatting with these women and carrying out a simple physical examination, I conclude that they are normal and healthy, and I tell them as much, including that hormone treatment or other medication is not the answer (see article on my website “Viagra for Women” for more information). Indeed, in long term relationships a mismatch in libido (sexual desire) between the sexes is common. With the passage of time in the typical heterosexual relationship women become less interested in sex than their man. The reasons underlying this phenomenon are complex but two general observations can be made: male libido tends to remain relatively constant with the passage of time while female libido, often equal to the male libido early in relationships, later tends to decrease especially in the face of factors such as young children, fatigue and the increasing complexity of life.

The early high libido in women and life-long libido of men is often referred to as biological drive - from an evolutionary perspective this ensures survival of the human species. What about female libido after the early-to mid reproductive years? Women have the potential to develop a second and more complex type of libido, sometimes termed “nurtured” desire at this stage in life. Nurtured libido tends to develop as the relationship matures and each partner learns to appreciate the more subtle qualities in their mate. This nurtured desire develops in women who feel comfortable and secure in their life situation and who feel validated and cherished by their partners.

Other issues should also be addressed – it is important for men to realise that in many women triggers to sexual desire other than the physical (visual/tactile etc) may play a prominent role. Some people have remarked that the largest sexual organ in women is their brain.

Unfortunately in many relationships even when the male is a good, kind, trustworthy and an overtly loving person, this nurtured type of libido remains undeveloped. In the presence of a unflagging male libido and a natural decline in biological drive and absence of nurtured desire in the woman there develops a disparity in sexual interest between partners. This is a formula for conflict as the woman who is feeling tired and uncherished turns away the sex-starved man. A vicious cycle may develop such that couples may find themselves facing a seemingly irreconcilable situation that in the presence of other stresses, may lead to complete failure of the relationship.

Is there a solution? Certainly there is no simple solution. Both men and women need to realise that disparity in sexual desire between the sexes is the normal state of affairs. ie: nearly all men at the same stage in life want more sex than they are getting just as most women want less. Men need to understand the phenomenon of the decline in biological desire in the woman but at the same time realise that there is the potential for it to be replaced by nurtured desire. Nurturing is what is commonly referred to as “working on the relationship”. Women need to understand that most men do not know how to nurture a woman and that men need to be encouraged to do so. This is also part of “working on the relationship”. As in many difficult life situations, compromise is the key. Often one partner will find himself or herself making what seems to be a greater sacrifice than the other.

I have discussed this issue widely with friends and colleagues and sought advice on potential

solutions. For men, distressingly I have not come up with any particularly useful or simple strategies. Self-help and relationship books suggest that men draw up to-do lists like: arrange special time together like candle-lit dinners, holidays, getting regular baby-sitters, doing chores without being reminded, making dinner etc. Of course these are very good suggestions and are easy to carry out early in a relationship when things are going well and when hurt and resentment may be small by comparison. However where a relationship has come to the point of serious conflict it may be too late: too late for a frustrated man to learn nurturing skills and/or for the resentful woman to be receptive to any such ideas.

Rather than concentrating on ways to turn her partner into a nurturing man, the woman should ensure she does not overlook the potential benefits of self nurturing: she should make time for activities for herself that promote feelings of well being and self fulfillment, and also decrease the potential for resentment that comes from relegating her own needs and interests to the needs of others (children, spouse and extended family for instance). The implication is that if the woman is meeting her own needs and subsequently feels good, she will look good and like herself more and perhaps feel more sexual.

Several colleagues and a friend of mine TB, have enunciated an approach that women may wish to consider when faced with a marriage failing ostensibly because of a frustrated male partner. For want of a better name I have called it "sexual generosity". I asked TB to put it in her own words – this is what she wrote.

"Men are simple basic creatures – make love to them every few days and they are very happy people!! I tell my girlfriends this when they are having marital problems. Men have very basic needs - food, shelter, sex and sports on TV. They don't want sex every night, but if they don't get it regularly, they think about it all the time. This would lead us to believe it occupies their mind full time. Do the Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday schedule and your life will be relatively stress-free. A happy man around the house will help out more and make your life easier! If you can't even bring yourself to do that, you should get out of the relationship. Let him out of his misery. Men don't get tired of their wives; they get tired of being turned down all the time. They turn to younger women, not because they are younger, sexier and more exciting, but because they are young, willing, able, not busy and not so damn tired all the time. Sure wives are tired, but what's half an hour - the payoffs are worth it. Don't think of it as a chore, but do think of it as an obligation. Maybe then you'll discover that you are not without desire and you'll start looking forward to your Tues/Thurs/Sat nights".